

To: Sarah Webster[swebster@blm.gov]
From: Webster, Sarah
Sent: 2017-05-30T16:14:20-04:00
Importance: Normal
Subject: BLM-CA in the News, May 30
Received: 2017-05-30T16:14:55-04:00
New Clips 5 30 LONG.pdf

CALIFORNIA

Gate fire sparks controversy over popular shooting spot

The San Diego Union-Tribune, May 27

...A dozen fires have started in the Marron Valley and Sycamore Canyon areas between 2011 and 2015, nine of them caused by shooters, according to BLM spokeswoman Samantha Storms. Each one costs tens of thousands of dollars to extinguish. Cal Fire records show three fires caused by shooting in the area in 2012 and 2013 racked up nearly \$200,000 in costs.

Supervisor Dianne Jacob Calls for Shooting Ban in Wake of Gate Fire

7 San Diego, May 24

San Diego County Supervisor Dianne Jacob called for a shooting ban on federal land Wednesday in the area where the May 20 Gate Fire was sparked by gunfire, spreading flames over more than 2,000 acres. "The issue has taken on even greater urgency following a major wildfire this past weekend," wrote Jacob to Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.

Trump's latest Interior Department pick is bursting with conflicts of interest and alternative facts

LA Times, editorial, May 25

...And then comes a nominee like David Bernhardt, Trump's pick for deputy secretary of the Interior...He also had a major role in drafting legislation to undermine those protections. His firm is a top lobbyist for Cadiz Inc., which wants to pump Mojave Desert groundwater and send it by aqueduct to Southern California cities.

Fire burning in Big Morongo Canyon

Hi-Desert Star, May 29

A fire burning in a remote area of Big Morongo Canyon covered 16 acres by Monday afternoon. The fire, which is in the new Sand to Snow National Monument, was reported around 11:30 p.m. Sunday. At its peak shortly after dawn Monday, 120 firefighters were working on the line, Cal Fire Battalion Chief Tony Jones said.

Wildfires on the rise due to drought and climate change

CBS News, May 28

Fighting wildfires in America cost federal agencies almost \$2 billion last year including more than half the budget of the U.S. Forest Service. Wildland fires are growing worse in a time of drought and climate change, and the biggest and most destructive fires can't be stopped. They are a force of nature: imagine trying to stop a hurricane. Yet the government has to try, because more than a 100 million Americans now live in -- or near -- forests and grasslands that can erupt in flames. This is what's left of a neighborhood in the Kern River Valley. It's outside Bakersfield, California.

Valley Voice: Changing market is molding 'green' power

The Desert Sun, opinion piece, May 29

The May 8 article "Solar and wind are booming just not in the California desert" suggests that limited availability of developable land is slowing growth of renewable energy in California. This is not the case. Work by the Nature Conservancy and others shows that California's renewable energy goals can be met in an economically viable manner without developing environmentally sensitive lands...Work products such as the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) will help them do that, in the most environmentally responsible manner. In fact, there are 10 solar projects currently moving forward within the framework of the DRECP, representing more than 2,900 MW of supply.

BLM imposes fire restrictions in California Desert District

Mohave Daily News, May 29

The federal Bureau of Land Management has imposed Stage III fire restrictions on public lands they control in the California Desert District: essentially from the Pacific coast around Thousand Oaks to the Nevada border above Death Valley and south to the Mexican border, except for a very narrow strip along the Colorado River from Bullhead City to Yuma.

BLM issues restrictions amid wildfire dangers

Bakersfield Now, May 25

Restrictions were announced Thursday in some Kern County areas because of increasing wildfire dangers. The Bureau of Land Management Bakersfield Field Office said the restrictions apply to federal public lands in Kern, Tulare, Fresno, Kings, Madera, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Ventura counties.

BLM issues new fire restrictions for San Diego

CBS 8 San Diego, May 27, 28

... The Bureau of Land Management Friday issued a stage three fire restriction, banning open fires and shooting. That action came days after County Supervisor Dianne Jacob

wrote the agency asking for additional restrictions.

Speak truth to Trump: Hands off our wildflowers and Giant Sequoias

The Fresno Bee, opinion piece, May 25

We've got wonderful national monuments that make for great day trips from anywhere in the Valley. Carrizo Plain in eastern San Luis Obispo County is like a small version of the pre-settlement San Joaquin Valley. This home of the giant kangaroo rat, Tule elk and pronghorn antelope has had a massive bloom of wildflowers in this wet year. Giant Sequoia National Monument is home to half of all existing Giant Sequoia redwood groves. These monuments were established under the Antiquities Act of 1906 to sustain all life forms, natural physical resources, historic structures and relics, and archaeological remains.

Deadly holiday weekend on roaring Kern River: 3 dead, 24 rescued
LA Times, May 29

For or the last five years, the drought severely depleted the Kern River, usually one of the fastest-flowing rivers in the West. But the exceedingly wet winter has returned the 165-mile Kern, California's 10th-longest river and a favorite among whitewater rafting enthusiasts, to a power not seen in years. Fueled by runoff that ultimately stretches from its headwaters at the base of Mt. Whitney, dramatic rapids and swift flows are returning to a river so feared that it's known as the "Killer Kern."

NATIONAL

Trump's BLM Budget Proposal Signals An 'American Energy Renaissance'

The Daily Caller, May 25

President Donald Trump's budget proposal for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) aims to reign in the agency while refocusing its priorities on energy production. Trump's budget, released Tuesday, allocates \$1.1 billion total in federal funds to BLM, a cut of \$160 million from last year. In large part, the cuts are made to functions of the agency related to protection of federal land and conservation of resources, Lori Sanders told *The Daily Caller News Foundation*. Sanders is the vice president of federal affairs for the R Street Institute, a free-market think tank.

Wild horses could be sold for slaughter or euthanized under Trump budget

The Washington Post, May 26

The Bureau of Land Management spends about \$50 million a year to house and feed more than 46,000 wild horses and burros in corrals. Another 73,000 of the animals roam freely across the western states, producing foals and grazing on public lands that conservationists and federal officials say are quickly deteriorating. It's an escalating equine-population problem, and the fiscal 2018 budget President Trump proposed this

week suggests a solution: using "humane euthanasia and unrestricted sale of certain excess animals."

Trump's bid to open U.S. monuments to development draws calls for protection

Reuters, May 26

The Trump administration's call for an opening of U.S. national monuments to economic development has drawn 107,00 comments from the public, with many expressing hope that sites like Utah's Bears Ears can maintain their protected status. President Donald Trump last month ordered the Interior Department to review some 27 national monuments created since 1996, with an eye to rescinding or shrinking the size of some of them to increase development opportunities.

Trump's bid for public input on national monuments may be a sham

Business Insider, May 23

In late April, field biologist Stanley Smith was catching up on emails at his desk in the College of Sciences at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, when he noticed a shocking note. It came from the Bureau of Land Management, an agency within the Department of the Interior, and informed Smith that the public lands advisory council in southern Nevada that he's served on for years was suspended. Across the country, other regional advisors got similar notices... The review would cover patches of wilderness that received the distinction after 1996, like Mojave Trails in California and Bears Ears in Utah, and would assess whether public opinion was adequately taken into account prior to elevating their status.

Democratic leaders ask Zinke to go easy on national monuments

FederalNewsRadio.com, May 26

In today's Federal Newscast, the minority leaders and whips of both chambers of Congress asked Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to not eliminate any national monuments. The minority leaders and whips of both chambers sent a letter to Zinke, reminding him of the cultural and historical significance of national monuments, which they say are under threat.

House Dems warn Zinke against altering sites

GREENWIRE, May 25

House Natural Resources ranking member Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) today cautioned Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke that only Congress has the authority to reduce the boundaries or revoke the status of national monuments, and asserted that any recommendations to President Trump to do so would be a "misuse of your time and the public's money." Trump issued an executive order in late April mandating the Interior Department to review the status of dozens of monuments created since 1996, largely at

the behest of critics of sites including Utah's Bears Ears National Monument and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. See *PDF for full story*.

[BLM budget details reveal cuts to conservation positions](#)

GREENWIRE, May 25

The Bureau of Land Management's fiscal 2018 budget proposes to reassign potentially dozens of agency staff working on greater sage grouse and sagebrush conservation and restoration efforts into other agency programs. The so-called budget justification for BLM's proposed \$1.1 billion budget released today, more than two days after President Trump unveiled his fiscal 2018 budget request proposes cutting \$11.5 million from the "Sagebrush Conservation Implementation Strategy." Part of that cut will mean eliminating 59 full-time-equivalent positions from BLM's Wildlife Management program, which is responsible for implementing the federal greater sage grouse conservation plans finalized in September 2015. Full-time-equivalent positions do not equate to actual employees, and sometimes denote unfilled positions. See *PDF for full story*.

[7 former Hill aides among 19 staffers joining Zinke's team](#)

GREENWIRE, May 30

The Interior Department announced late Friday that more than a dozen temporary political appointees and five other officials have joined the Trump administration. Among the 19 permanent appointees are seven veterans of Capitol Hill, where Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke served as a Montana congressman prior. There are also several officials who worked in previous Republican administrations or on the Trump campaign. See *PDF for full story*.

[Wildlife, renewables take back seat to oil and gas in budget](#)

ENERGYWIRE, May 30

In southwest Wyoming, a plan to revise greater sage grouse management on a 3.5-million-acre mineral estate could be in jeopardy under the Interior Department's proposed fiscal 2018 budget. But with the domestic energy business in a natural pause prompted by low oil and gas prices, this is exactly the time for the federal government to focus on investing in critical wildlife habitats and sustainable job creation, some Western conservationists say. "Now is the time to set up wildlife habitat for success," said Chris Merrill, associate director of the Wyoming Outdoor Council. "Now is the time to get the policy framework right." See *PDF for full story*.

[Retrial in Bunkerville standoff case postponed until July](#)

Las Vegas-Review Journal, May 25

The retrial in the first Bunkerville standoff case is scheduled to open with jury selection

July 10. A mistrial was declared in the case in April, after jurors deadlocked on 50 of the 60 counts against six defendants. Federal prosecutors decided this month to retry four of the men, who are accused of providing the firepower in a mass assault against federal agents. The agents were in Bunkerville to seize rancher Cliven Bundy's cattle after decades of unpaid grazing fees.

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NATIONAL

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GREENWIRE, May 25

House Natural Resources ranking member Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) today cautioned Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke that only Congress has the authority to reduce the boundaries or revoke the status of national monuments, and asserted that any recommendations to President Trump to do so would be a "misuse of your time and the public's money."

Trump issued an executive order in late April mandating the Interior Department to review the status of dozens of monuments created since 1996, largely at the behest of critics of sites including Utah's Bears Ears National Monument and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

But Grijalva, along with 85 other Democrats, including Assistant House Democratic Leader James Clyburn (D-S.C.) and House Democratic Caucus Chairman Joe Crowley (D-N.Y.), warned Zinke in a letter today that any attempt by the Trump administration to alter existing monuments could run afoul of the Constitution.

"While stewardship of America's national monuments is your solemn responsibility, the continued existence of those national monuments is ours," Grijalva wrote.

He pointed to the Constitution's Property Clause, which gives Congress exclusive power to manage public lands.

Although Congress granted presidents authority to designate federal lands as monuments under the Antiquities Act of 1906, Grijalva noted that the law does not include authority to diminish or abolish such designations.

"The Constitutional authority to revoke or shrink a national monument lies with the Congress," he wrote.

Past presidents have reduced the size of some monuments — President Kennedy was the last executive to do so when he cut the Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico by 4,000 acres while also adding 2,900 acres to the site. But those decisions occurred before the enactment of the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act of 1976.

"Wildfire, drought, sprawl, invasive species, unmet maintenance needs, and more threaten the unique natural, cultural, and historical resources you manage on behalf of the American people," Grijalva wrote. "Families living on Indian Reservations face among the highest rates of poverty and illness in the world. A changing climate is melting the glaciers for which the National Park near your hometown is named."

He concluded: "Given these significant and growing challenges, developing a report to the President regarding the use of authority he does not possess is a misuse of your time and the public's money."

In a statement, Grijalva also pointed to the 1938 finding by the then-attorney general that asserted a president does not have the power to revoke a monument designation. To date, no president has attempted to undo the designation of any of his predecessors.

Conservative scholars at the Pacific Legal Foundation and American Enterprise Institute, however, argued in an analysis released in March that the president maintains a "general discretionary revocation power" under the Antiquities Act (E&E News PM, March 29).

Bears Ears lawsuit

The Western Values Project, a Montana-based government watchdog group, filed a lawsuit yesterday seeking the release of documents on President Obama's decision to create the Bears Ears monument in his final weeks in office.

In a statement, the organization noted that it had previously filed a Freedom of Information Act request for documents related to the 1.35-million-acre Utah monument as well as other designations made since 2014, including the Gold Butte National Monument in Nevada, Browns Canyon National Monument in Colorado and the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument in Maine, along with the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument expansion in Oregon and California.

"Secretary Zinke and the Trump administration have done everything they can to shut the public out of their sham review, but we're not going to let them get away with withholding basic information that they are required by law to disclose," Western Values Project Executive Director Chris Saeger said in a statement.

BLM budget details reveal cuts to conservation positions

GREENWIRE, May 25

The Bureau of Land Management's fiscal 2018 budget proposes to reassign potentially dozens of agency staff working on greater sage grouse and sagebrush conservation and restoration efforts into other agency programs.

The so-called budget justification for BLM's proposed \$1.1 billion budget — released today, more than two days after President Trump unveiled his fiscal 2018 budget request — proposes cutting \$11.5 million from the "Sagebrush Conservation Implementation Strategy."

Part of that cut will mean eliminating 59 full-time-equivalent positions from BLM's Wildlife Management program, which is responsible for implementing the federal greater sage grouse conservation plans finalized in September 2015. Full-time-equivalent positions do not equate to actual employees, and sometimes denote unfilled positions.

An agency source said BLM will "work assiduously" to reassign any current employees affected by the cuts to open positions in other programs. In addition, reductions will be achieved through retirements and leaving some positions on the books unfilled.

"The BLM is committed to caring for our thousands of dedicated team members across the United States," Matthew Allen, a BLM spokesman, said in emailed statement to E&E News. "The President's budget allows the BLM to focus on priority areas and also affords the BLM latitude in meeting long-term staffing needs through tools like attrition and retirement incentives."

There are plenty of new positions to fill. The budget justification document calls for an additional \$16 million and 82 new full-time-equivalent employees for "oil and gas management," and an additional \$8 million and 48 full-time equivalents for coal management.

Sources also cautioned that the fiscal 2018 budget request is only a proposal, and that nothing in it is finalized until Congress votes to approve a budget.

But the document is clear that BLM wants to scale back implementation of the federal grouse plans that took years to finalize and involved states, the oil and gas industry, and numerous other stakeholders.

The plans amended 98 BLM and Forest Service land-use plans to incorporate grouse conservation measures covering nearly 70 million acres of federal lands in 10 Western states. They were instrumental in convincing the Fish and Wildlife Service not to list the greater sage grouse for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The budget justification document states that \$40.5 million will be directed toward grouse protection activities, such as implementing the Obama-era grouse plans. Congress appropriated \$68.9 million for grouse conservation in the fiscal 2017 omnibus spending package approved earlier this month.

But most of the focus will now be directed to "monitoring of priority habitat areas," as well as addressing long-standing concerns and criticisms of the final plans from states and other stakeholders.

BLM grouse conservation efforts will also work on "maintaining data sets and geospatial information to meet the commitments made in the land use plans, providing information to State partners and the public and increasing transparency," the document states.

BLM will also focus on "ensuring strategic implementation of restoration actions, travel and transportation planning, partnership development, and training focused in the highest priority areas."

In addition, "BLM will continue to work ... with states and other partners where shared funding and activities can result in cost-savings," the document says.

The moves concern some conservation leaders.

"Cutting more than one-fifth of the budget and more than 50 employees from the sagebrush conservation strategy stands in stark contrast to the many vital actions that the BLM then

acknowledges it has committed to take to implement greater sage grouse conservation," said Nada Culver, senior counsel and director of the Wilderness Society's BLM Action Center.

A number of conservation leaders yesterday told E&E News that cuts to implementation of the greater sage grouse plans outlined in a "budget highlights" document would harm the grouse.

"The agency's own 'highlights' further concede they will be delaying needed actions as a result of these budget cuts," Culver added. "This budget is an underhanded way to welch on the agency's fundamental commitments and could put the greater sage grouse and the hundreds of other species that rely on this habitat at risk."

Grouse population declines have already been measured in Utah and Wyoming, "and a Trump administration plan to expand oil and gas drilling on federal lands indicate that the problem of grouse declines and sagebrush habitat loss are far from over," said Steve Holmer, vice president of policy at the American Bird Conservancy.

7 former Hill aides among 19 staffers joining Zinke's team

GREENWIRE, May 30

The Interior Department announced late Friday that more than a dozen temporary political appointees and five other officials have joined the Trump administration.

Among the 19 permanent appointees are seven veterans of Capitol Hill, where Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke served as a Montana congressman prior. There are also several officials who worked in previous Republican administrations or on the Trump campaign.

"I'm incredibly honored to have so many experienced, capable and energetic individuals on the team at Interior," Zinke said in a statement. "Together we will work toward modernizing the department and delivering better services and experiences to the taxpayer while cutting costs and protecting our most treasured places."

Top hires include Scott Hommel, a Marine veteran who was the treasurer of the Special Operations For America (SOFA), a super political action committee that was founded by Zinke and was originally based in one of his houses. The super PAC spent \$175,000 to support Zinke during the 2014 election cycle and paid over \$11,000 for consulting services to a company that he owned, prompting complaints from ethics watchdogs (Greenwire, May 25).

After Zinke's election to the House, Hommel left SOFA to serve as the Montana Republican's chief of staff — a position he now holds in the secretary's office.

Micah Chambers is another high-ranking Interior official with a long history with Zinke. Chambers spent a year campaigning for the former Navy SEAL before following him to Capitol Hill. He served for two years as the congressman's deputy chief of staff and legislative director and is now the deputy director of the Interior's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs.

Other permanent Interior political appointees who worked for Zinke on the Hill are adviser Amanda Kaster-Averill, his former energy and natural resources legislative assistant; advance

representative Aaron Thiele, his former military legislative assistant; and special assistant Caroline Boulton, his former scheduler. Thiele was the only one in the group who didn't serve on the so-called beachhead team of temporary appointees.

Zinke's permanent staff includes a couple of officials with experience in both the legislative and executive branches.

Scott Cameron, who was hired to serve as principal deputy assistant secretary for policy, management and budget, served as a legislative assistant for former Sen. Chic Hecht (R-Nev.) in the mid-1980s before moving to the White House Office of Management and Budget as deputy chief of the Interior branch, according to his profile on the networking website LinkedIn. He would later join Interior as deputy assistant secretary for performance, accountability and human resources.

For the past few years, Cameron has been working as a consultant to combat invasive species, which his profile describes as "the most pressing inadequately addressed ecological problem facing the planet."

Virginia Johnson, Interior's principal deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, served in a variety of counselor roles in the House from 1996 until 2004, according to her LinkedIn profile. She would later work on legislative affairs for the Department of Defense. Prior to joining the Interior beachhead team, she was director of federal relations for former North Carolina Republican Gov. Pat McCrory.

Zinke's team also includes officials who bring a wealth of experience from previous Republican administrations.

James Cason, the associate deputy secretary, is a George W. Bush-era official who served as Interior associate deputy secretary from 2001 to 2009. He also served stints at Interior under Republican Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush. In 1989, Bush sought to elevate Cason to assistant secretary of Agriculture for natural resources and environment, but his nomination was withdrawn in the face of objections from the Senate and environmental groups (Greenwire, Jan. 23).

Cason is leading an Interior rule-cutting task force with Daniel Jorjani, the principal deputy solicitor, who served as counselor to the deputy Interior secretary during the George W. Bush administration. Before working on Trump's "landing team" during the transition from the Obama administration, Jorjani worked a general counsel at Freedom Partners, a free-market group funded by oil magnates Charles and David Koch (E&E News PM, April 24).

Russell Roddy, the director of scheduling and advance, and Laura Keehner Rigas, the communications director, also served under previous Republican presidents. Roddy's service dates back to the Reagan administration. Rigas, meanwhile, served in the George W. Bush administration. She was not a beachhead team member but has been working at Interior for more than a month (Greenwire, April 7).

Rigas replaced Megan Bloomgren, who plans to rejoin the DCI Group, a Republican public relations, lobbying and consulting shop, where she previously worked as a partner.

Campaigners confirmed

The hiring announcement confirmed the identities of several Trump campaign officials that the department previously refused to acknowledge (Greenwire, March 30):

- Deputy Director of External Affairs Timothy Williams, worked on Trump's Nevada team.
- Joshua Campbell, an adviser in the Office of the Solicitor, worked on Trump's national advance and election law teams and originally joined the Energy Department beachhead team.
- Marshall Critchfield, an adviser to the assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, was director of special projects for the Trump campaign, according to his LinkedIn profile.
- Special Assistant Natalie Davis held various jobs on the Trump campaign including director of Ohio's Sportsmen for Trump coalition.

Two Trump campaigners who were not on the administration's beachhead team have also joined Interior: Steven Smith, an adviser on intergovernmental affairs in the Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs, who previously worked as special assistant to the co-chair of the Republican National Committee; and Jason Funes, an assistant in external affairs, who worked in Trump's Florida campaign office.

The two remaining hires officially announced last week come from more unusual backgrounds.

Lori Mashburn, Interior's White House liaison, previously helped lead the coalition relations office at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

And Brian Pavlik, a special assistant at the National Park Service, was concession program manager for Indiana State Parks and general manager of the Washington Sailing Marina, an NPS concessionaire. He was not previously on the beachhead team.

Wildlife, renewables take back seat to oil and gas in budget
 ENERGYWIRE, May 30

In southwest Wyoming, a plan to revise greater sage grouse management on a 3.5-million-acre mineral estate could be in jeopardy under the Interior Department's proposed fiscal 2018 budget.

But with the domestic energy business in a natural pause prompted by low oil and gas prices, this is exactly the time for the federal government to focus on investing in critical wildlife habitats and sustainable job creation, some Western conservationists say.

"Now is the time to set up wildlife habitat for success," said Chris Merrill, associate director of the Wyoming Outdoor Council. "Now is the time to get the policy framework right."

The Bureau of Land Management's Rock Springs Field Office has been in the process of amending its Green River Resource Management Plan (RMP) to address greater sage grouse

management. Last week, Interior proposed directing \$40.5 million toward grouse protection, down from \$68.9 million in the fiscal 2017 omnibus spending package (Greenwire, May 25).

BLM's budget also contains a \$10 million reduction for the Resource Management Planning, Assessment and Monitoring program. The reduced allocation would require a reprioritization of efforts to focus on the expansion of coal, oil and gas development, according to Interior's budget in brief.

"If you don't have an emphasis on balance, on conserving the best habitat while at the same time allowing for development where it makes sense, we risk losing some of this great habitat that we have and that we need to conserve for the future," Merrill said.

The reductions to BLM's sage grouse and RMP programs are part of an overall \$163 million proposed budget decrease for the bureau. BLM's oil and gas programs, however, received a \$16 million bump (Energywire, May 24).

"The BLM budget generally prioritizes and advances the president's priorities related to jobs and energy security with resource allocation that supports increased coal, oil and gas production," the budget proposal says.

Wyoming's oil and gas regulator saw the increases as a promising sign — even if the market isn't currently supporting new production.

"The oil price is obviously one major factor for an operator in determining if they are going to pick up a rig, but the certainty of having these permits in hand allows the operator to optimize the rig schedule and drill those permits which provide the best chance for a return on the investment in this price environment," said Tom Kropatsch, deputy oil and gas supervisor at the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission.

The funding increase would help erase a backlog of nearly 3,000 applications for permit to drill (APDs), he said (Energywire, May 17).

But as of late 2015, more than 7,000 approved APDs were still unused by industry.

That pileup signals that BLM action won't automatically bring back production, said David Hayes, former Interior deputy secretary under President Obama.

"The notion that Interior is going to lead some renaissance here ... is misplaced," Hayes told reporters on a conference call last week.

Although the budget is unlikely to be implemented as is, the proposal is a bellwether of the Trump administration's priorities, said Greg Zimmerman, deputy director of the Center for Western Priorities.

"It is an indication of the Trump administration and [Interior Secretary] Ryan Zinke's vision for public lands and the role of energy and conservation on public lands," Zimmerman said.

If the administration is also looking at rolling back drilling safeguards for water supplies and wildlife habitat, he said, "speeding up the pace of leasing could lead to some pretty unfortunate consequences."

New Mexico

In New Mexico, Interior's budget has been regarded as a missed opportunity for renewables.

Oil towns have seen massive layoffs since the bust hit, and the governor is working to plug the state's budget gap. Fossil fuels are the backbone of New Mexico's economy, but with the industry in a slump, the time is ripe for investment in more sustainable job creation, said Garrett VeneKlasen, executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation.

Yet onshore and offshore renewable energy programs got a reduction under Interior's proposed budget.

"I think the administration is being regressive in their approach around energy," VeneKlasen said. "I think it's a mistake. We need to fund renewables at the same level — if not more — than we fund fossil fuels."

New Mexico ranks 48th in renewable energy production, according to the Department of Energy.

"It's crazy that a sunny state like New Mexico isn't leading the nation in renewable energy production," VeneKlasen said.

The state's renewable energy industry will thrive regardless of federal priorities, said Carla Sonntag, president of the New Mexico Business Coalition.

"Even if government subsidies to those industries are not going to be increased, with increased demand, solar and wind are still going to do well," she said.

For the nation, increased oil and gas development means improved national security and less dependence on foreign energy sources, Sonntag said. For New Mexico, it means more revenue and jobs, she said.

"We couldn't have enough of that in New Mexico right now," she said.

Interior's investment coincides with an uptick in activity in the Permian Basin, the oily formation that touches New Mexico's southeastern corner, Sonntag said.

"When you have government at any level that is supportive of an industry, you will see the industry do better," she said. "When you have an attitude of not wanting to see production, that tends to flow through, and it does hamper production."

Colorado

Shawn Bolton, a commissioner in Colorado's Rio Blanco County, welcomed the shift in BLM's budget — so long as proposed staff cuts don't reduce personnel count in the field offices.

"BLM seems to be awfully heavy in management, but it's the on-the-ground people they're missing," he said.

The field offices need more staff to conduct environmental analyses and APD site visits so applications can be processed in a timelier fashion, he said.

"Those are the time frames that need to be shortened," Bolton said.

Interior's budget includes recommendations cutting 1,062 BLM staff members and suggests limiting departmentwide hiring in Washington and Denver. Bolton said he's heard that Interior will be aiming to keep the BLM field offices intact.

"We can't afford to lose people on the ground," he said.

Others fear BLM could lose enforcers of its rules — like its Methane and Waste Prevention Rule, which remains on the books after a failed attempt by Congress to scrap it (Greenwire, May 10).

"It's dangerously irresponsible" to cut Interior's land management programs "while they elevate this one use," said Scott Braden, wilderness and public lands advocate for Conservation Colorado.

In Mesa County, where Braden lives, there are three national conservation areas that could be hurt by reduced visitor services, he said.

"As places like my town seek to diversify our economy and engage people, we're going to see a reduced capacity to do that at the expense of elevating oil and gas," Braden said. "That directly hurts our communities in our efforts to become more of a recreation destination."

Interior's energy priorities seem misdirected, said David Jenkins, president of Conservatives for Responsible Stewardship.

"They're ignoring taking care of the land in the name of trying to chase some money in oil and gas when the market's not demanding it," he said.

BLM's budget should be more supportive of a diversified public lands economy, said La Plata County Commissioner Gwen Lachelt.

"We'll probably continue to have oil and gas development at some level for the next 30 years, but it can't be our only source of income," she said.

"We desperately need to get beyond the boom-and-bust economy."

